

Diasporic Experiences in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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Abstract

This research article aims to elaborate the diasporic themes of cultural identity, language as a barrier, alienation, and nostalgia in the lives of the character in The Namesake and especially its main character Gogal Ganguli. Moreover, entities like culture, nationality and belonging which are the main concerns of the characters in the novel and the reasons for their displacement tend to be loose and changeable in a contemporary perspective and a covetous sense of freedom and emancipation from these concepts could be traced the course of the novel.

Key words: Cultural alienation, cultural identity, parents-children relationship and nostalgia

The story has so many diasporic experiences such as language as a barrier,

alienation, cultural identity, name and identity, relationship between parents and children and nostalgia. The novel is a story about the assimilation of an Indian Bengali family from Calcutta, the Ganguli, into America, over thirty years (from 1968 – 2000). The cultural conflict experienced by them and their American born children in different ways, the spatial, cultural and emotional dislocation suffered by them in their effort to settle “home” in the new land. Like many “professional Indians” who in the waves of the early sixty’s, went to the united states, as part of the “brain drain”. Ashoke Ganguli too leaves his homeland and comes to America in pursuit of higher studies in the field of “fiber optics”, with a prospect of setting down “with security and respect”.

After two year’s stay in the USA he comes back to India, marries a nineteen years old Bengali girl from Calcutta named Ashima, who has no idea or dream of going

to a place called Boston so far off from her parents, but agrees for the marriage. After the legal formalities, she flies alone to be with her husband, with a heavy heart and lots of instructions from her family members and relatives who come to see her off at Dum Airport “not to eat beef or wear skirts or cut off her hair and forget the family the moment she landed in Boston”(37). Ashima often feels upset and homesick and sulks alone in their three room apartment which is too hot in summer and too cold in the winter, for removed from the description of house in the English novels she has read. She feels spatially and emotionally dislocated from the comfortable home of her father full of so many loving ones and yearns to go back. Home is ‘a mystic place of desire’ in the immigrant imagination. (Brah: 192: 1997)

Most of the time she remains lost in the memories of her home thinking of the activities going there by calculating ‘the Indians time on her hands’ which is ‘ten and a half hours ahead in Calcutta’. She spends her time on rereading Bengali short stories, poems and article from the Bengali magazines, she has brought with her. She “keeps her ears trained, between the hours of twelve and two, for the sound of the

postman’s footsteps on the porch, followed by the soft click of the mail slot in the door, (36) Waiting for her parents letters which she keeps collecting in her white bag and rereads them often. But the most terrifying experience for her is ‘Motherhood in a foreign land’, so far from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved, “without a single grand parent or parent or uncle or aunt at her side, and to raise a child in a country, where she is related to no one, whose she knows little, where life seems so tentative and spare” (*The Namesake: 35*).

She is only character in the novel that assimilates to the American melting-pot adapts herself to a transcultural lifestyle at the end. As suggest by Alfonso-Forero, “the uncertain young woman we encounter in the novel’s opening pages attempting unsuccessfully to recreate a favorite Indian snack in her Massachusetts kitchen is transformed through her role as an immigrant mother and wife into a transnational figure” (852). The main and primary reason for Ashima’s displacement in the American society is the distinction between two very difficult cultures. America and India culturally, they have crucial differences. While women and men seem to

be equally independent in America, there are certain cultural peculiarities in the Indian perspective as to the role of the sexes in society. Ashima is the most spiritual and Indian figure of the family. Where there is a reminder of India and Indian customs. Ashima is at the heart of the matter. She establishes numerous parties with the invited Indian families in America – the circle of which grow larger each year – to maintain the Indian customs and create surrogate India in America. Describing the Indian family culture, Alfonso – forero writes:

“The distinction between the material and the spiritual in the domain of culture is essential to how nationalism attempts to resolve the women’s question... The division between ghar – the home, an inherently spiritual and female space – and bahir – the outside world, which is inherently male and dominated by material pursuits – determines not only the division of labor in terms of how the Indian home is run, but more importantly it positions women as the guardian and propagators of Indian culture. In this manner Indian nationalism elevates the condition of the middle – class woman to a goddess – like status...” (853–4)

It is inside the house that India should be preserved, for the outside is inevitably America. This is what Ashima is trying to do all the time: to preserve her family’s Indian identity “against the appeal to assimilate”. Gradually Ashima learns how to be independent. Takes pride in rearing up the child, moves out alone in the market with her baby, communicates with the passersby who smile at him and goes to meet her husband on the campus, she grows confident. The very feeling of displacement is felt more by her, after their migration from the university apartments to a university town outside Boston, when Ashoke is ‘hired as an Assistant professor of electrical Engineering a university’. The shift to this suburban area with no ‘street lights’, no public transportation, no stores for miles’ makes Ashima feel ‘more drastic more distressing than the move from Calcutta to Cambridge had been’.

Feeling lonely and displaced in foreign land Ashima begins to realize that, being a foreigner...is a sort of lifelong pregnancy – a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover the previous life has vanished,

replaced by something more complicated and demanding. Like pregnancy, being a foreigner, Ashima believes, is something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect". (*The Namesake*: 49 – 50). As times goes by, Ashima indulges herself more in the American way of life which gradually provides her with the sort of confidence and independence that a typical American woman is supposed to have. She finds a job as a librarian which results in more contact with the outside world and becomes friends with her American colleagues, a kind of relationship that she had never experienced before; she eventually does her husband's duties like paying the bills, buying tickets, driving the car and changing the house which she never did before his death. She later realizes that her life in America exceeds her life in India: she is as much American as Indian.

She gains cultural and geographical fluidity by the very practice of her life through the decades. After her husband dies, she decides to divide her time between India and America: living between her roots in India and her family in America. Thus is Ashima's transformation to a transnational figure, "true to the meaning of her name, she

will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere" (Lahiri276).

Ashoke, is also an important figure in the story. He is a defining character both for the family and for Gogol as the protagonist. His accident in the train in India, his decision and effort in moving to America and his death in America are three ways in which he is important to the novel. Ashoke has seen worse calamities in his life; the train accident in which he thought he was dead in one such event; when his train mate was found dead, he was surprised to be alive. The novelist captures his moment of crisis in the following words:

"He remembers believing that he was dying, that perhaps he was already dead. He could not feel the lower half of his body, and so was unaware that the mangled limbs of Ghosh were draped over his legs. Eventually he saw the cold, unfriendly blue of earliest morning, the moon and a few stars still lingering in the sky". (18)

His rescue from the train – by holding a page of Nikolai Gogol's book and dropping it to attract the attention of the rescuers – was a strong and constant memory for him which later caused him to name his son after the Russian writer. It was

an affectionate relic of his personal life, told to Gogol, the protagonist, by the time that he had already begun to hate his name and had changed it. His death is also very important since, it is a turning point in the lives of the other characters both physically and emotionally. It is through his absence that Ashima and Gogol enter and gain new and different perceptions of life and make crucial changes to their lives. After Ashoke dies, Gogol breaks up with his American girl friend Maxine and is more concerned about his family and retains some of his buried Indian side of identity, especially by taking his mother's advice to marry Moushumi, a family; not only does she have to live alone but she also has to limit her ways of life to the American side of the family (her children) and do the household responsibilities which were previously taken by Ashoke.

The critical situation in the novel comes when Gogol, the son of the Ganguli's grows up and is exposed to the dilemmas of the culture which his parents had been facing ever since they set their foot in America. While his parents had to wrestle with the memories and the distance of and from the motherland, Gogol has to grapple with both the culture and tradition which

how he is a part of it. The plight of the second generation has been rendered in the novel in the most exquisite style which at once propels to identify the characters. The novel hinges around these two cardinal characters – Ashima and Gogol which sum up the dilemmas and predicaments of two different perspectives. The first and second generation immigrants have different woes to relate to and Ashima and Gogol embody those ordeals to perfection. One of the most significant traits of the immigrant existence is the striking of balance between the two worlds – the homeland and the adopted one. The love and reverence for one's culture and roots is never out of mind and the first generation migrant always expects his/her children also to revere the same roots and culture which he/she is an off shoot of. For that reason, the child is made familiar with the cultural products of his country by the parents the myths, stories, literature, etc. But the importance of the cultural shades of the adopted land can't be neglected.

The future of the second generation lies there and he must be made to learn the peculiarities of that culture too. The Ganguli's befriend many Indian – Americans around them which is done to relieve their past history and traditions – to

stimulate the home country which is far. Robert Cohen comments, “A member’s adherence to a diasporic community is demonstrated by an acceptance of an escapable link with their past migration history and a sense of co-ethnicity with others of a similar background”. (26) They get together at all religious festival and ceremonies at each other’s houses only to procure a “little India” which they all cherish.

When Gogol is born at a hospital in America, it is more than a month after Ashima’s grandmother, hearing about her pregnancy, has posted a letter which contains two names: a girl’s and a boy’s. The letter does not arrive until Ashoke and Ashima decide to put the pet name “Gogol” in the birth certificate to release him from the hospital according to the American law that the birth certificate should contain a name. The letter containing Gogol’s original or real name is lost and the grandmother who has revealed the name to nobody dies after a coma. Thus the name is absent, but it is also present since everybody knows that it exists somewhere but as Heinze says it is “lost in transit” (194). The resemblance of Gogol’s life story which his name’s fate similarly draws his identity into

consideration: Gogol’s identity and the sense of self are in permanent transit. It is never delivered to him until the end of the story.

According to Heinze, Gogol’s name is singular. This is because it has no meanings for Gogol. It is neither a first name nor a last name in America or India, the two places that Gogol knows and is intimate with. He cannot imagine his connection with the last name of a Russian writer. This “singularity” of his first name frightens and displaces him particularly after he learns about the absurdity of the Russian writer at school as a mentally troubled genius. This is the beginning of his hatred of his name. He is scared to introduce himself as Gogol to the girl whom he kissed for the first time in his life. So he says to her that his name is Nikhil, another name which was suggested by his parents as a good name but had never been used: by doing this “not only does he changes his ‘overcoat’ and his behavior towards others but he also changes who he is, if that means his past, the complex concoction of his personal and cultural identity up to this point” (Heinze 195).

Eventually, he changes his name to Nickhil officially at the court, a change

which makes him a different person but also cuts him off from his cultural past, and his family. There is no past to be identified by the new name. Still, he is called Gogol by his own family and the people who know him from the past. He feels like an actor. “At times he feels as he’s cast himself in a play, acting the part of twins, indistinguishable to the naked eye yet fundamentally different”. (Lahiri 105) This new quality of character which is created in him by changing his name while the other is valid among his family and he related network of friends from the past is referred to as “doppelganger” by Heinze (195). By entering university in another city he separates himself from his family geographically. After this he can claim the new world and personal identity for himself in a place where everybody would know him as Nikhil. ‘Nikhil is his overcoat which makes the ways in which he is different from other American invisible’ (Caesar 110). It is in this phase of his life that he begins his several relationships with girls who know only his second name.

But it is also after changing his name that he is disturbed by the knowledge of his namesake revealed to him one day by his father in the car. It is hard to imply how this

knowledge affects Gogol but certainly he is not impervious to the news. He can’t conceal his being ostensibly offended by being told about this after so many years but it is a sudden shock for his to contemplate more around his name and his affection for his family and especially for his father. This is what shows itself more clearly towards the end of the novel is when Gogol is sitting at his parent’s home reading, “the overcoat” for the first time since he was given the book when he was fourteen. It was a gift from his father with his handwriting on the front endpaper “For Gogol Ganguli” and then toward the upper right hand corners of the page “The man who gave you his name, from the man who gave you your name” (Lahiri 288). That is a remainder of the day his father gave him the book quoting Dostoyevsky’s saying that “we all came out of Gogol’s coat”, and in the answer to Gogol who had asked him about the meaning of that phrase he said: “It will make sense to you one day” (Lahiri 78).

Caesar believes that “for Ashoke, Gogol is a new life, a rebirth, the creation of another life in another country, both his own life and his children’s” (110). By giving this name to his son he tries to give him a transnational identity but Gogol rejects it. In

fact, the three different senses mentioned are connected because Gogol's identity – related preoccupations regarding his name mingle with his affections to his father towards a more displacing factor: his father's savior and the means of his happiness have been exactly what he has hated all his life. Gogol does not have lasting relationship with girls. This is a typical American style of transitory relationships. But for Gogol they are not merely relationships. These relationships together with changing his name from Gogol to Nikil were the beginning of a project in search of a self and an investment in constructing a new identity for him. But the inconsistency of this relationship deprives him of having a sense of continuity and thus a fixed and established self and identity. He passively seeks for a self in every emotional relationship. By the beginning and the end of each relationship he is in and out of a new self. Each relationship which is part of his social self becomes a new overcoat for him and accordingly he mistakes it for his material self and consequently for his essential self.

Gogol doesn't think of India as his country or 'desh', he sees himself as purely American. Though Gogol considers himself an American, he is brought up by between

two diametrically different cultures, similar to Bhabha's in between space where people can, to a certain extent, move and negotiate within their worlds (Homi: 1-2:1994). He is both Indian and American. He belongs to Indian parents on a different geographical space than India and is acculturated as an Indian at home but outside the house, he is an American. He thinks of India as a 'foreign country' far away from home, both physically and psychologically (*The Namesake* 118). He struggles to reconcile his dual culture.

The culminating point of his passive relationship is his second love Maxine in New York: a juxtaposition of two very different identities – Gogol with his complicated background, a first – generation American with parents who are Indian – Americans and his discomfort with his own sense of the self and lacking identity which provides him with a peculiar identity in having no identity; and Maxine, an American girl with American parents from generations of Americans who is absolutely comfortable with her own sense of the self, its continuity and her simply – defined identity as an American. Despite Maxine's initial attempt to absorb him, Gogol's unconscious thirst for adopting an identity

and his passivity regarding his relationships let him succumb to Maxine and Maxine's family's way of life very soon in their relationship.

He abandons his own apartment and comes to live with Maxine in her parental home. This is while he tries to be as distant as possible from his own family in Massachusetts for as long as possible. He does not even answer his mother's phone calls, and when his mother asks about the reason he does not tell her that his immersion in Maxine's family is a betrayal of his own" (Lahiri 141), but he needs this distance partly because in this way, he can concentrate more on his new relationship which is of an absolutely different nature from all his part and by which he feels exotic, and partly because he feels free of expectation, of responsibility, in willing exile from his own life" (142). Maxine's family, their house in New York, their summer cottage in New Hampshire, their food and wine, their dressing and expensive and comfortable way of life "The Ratliffs own the moon that floats over the lake, and the sun and the clouds" (Lahiri 155) which is symbols of the material life of the family construct Gogol's new identity.

Gogol's father dies from a heart attack in Ohio when Gogol is still with Maxine. He goes there to collect his father's body and then prepares for the funeral in Massachusetts. His father is dead but what is left of him, in his possessions, his house, his wife and children, his friends and the memory of him are his material and social relics. Gogol breaks up with Maxine because he realizes that he is tacitly out of her world. He thinks that it is impossible for her to understand and sympathize with the complications of his life and his past. "He remembers Maxine's reaction to his telling her about his other name, as they'd driven up from his parent's house.

"That's the cutest thing I've ever heard", she's said. And then she'd never mentioned it again, this essential fact about his life slipping from her mind and so many others did" (Lahiri 156). To continue with her means the continuance of his negligence of his family. But he has already entered his father's world even if it is his material world. "He doesn't want to be with someone who barely knew his father, who's met him only once" (Lahiri 170). A detailed description of Ashoke's possessions in this part of the novel together with Gogol's trying to connect emotionally with his father

or the grief of his loss through his belongings reinforces the idea that he wants to make his way back to his previous life as symbolized by his family. Now, he is at the threshold of changing the self again. As Caesar argues: The self that he assumed with Maxine is abandoned, an empty shell of a self he can walk away from with few regrets it is not who Gogol is. Indeed, Gogol defines himself primarily by who he isn't, by rejecting or refusing to choose potential definitions as he did when he was a baby and refused to choose the object that was supposed to foretell occupation in life. (113).

The advent of his relationship with Moushumi is also a passive response to his mother's will which is fortified by his own inclination to his past and family roots especially after his father's death. Beginning his relationship with Moushumi, Gogol is a spectator again. He enters Moushumi's life when he is ready to adopt another identity and self for himself through a constructed personality that he sees in Moushumi especially her experience of living in France: "Here Moushumi had reinvented herself without misgivings, without guilt. He admires her... He realizes that this is what their parents had done in America what he,

in all likelihood, will never do" (Lahiri 233). Moushumi, Gogol's wife, is the most complicated character in the novel regarding the concept of identity. Having Indian parents, being born in England, having lived in England, America and France together with having several relationships with people from diverse backgrounds and nationalities, makes her an intricate personality who is also in search of a fixed identity without noticing it. She seems to be reluctant in accepting a fixed and defined identity due to her way of living.

She identifies herself as an Indian to such an extent that she breaks up with her former fiancé Graham because she cannot tolerate him "rejecting her background, being critical of her family's heritage" (Lahiri 217). At the same time she shows distaste and disrespect for the Indian ways that are around her "she hated the way they would talk of the details of her wedding, the menu and the different colors of saris she would wear for the different ceremonies, as if it were a fixed certainly in her life" (Lahiri 213). She identified herself as an English person for long after she had settled in America: "She speaks with nostalgia of the years her family had spent in England.... She tells him that she had hated moving to

America, that she had held on to her British accent for as long as she could” (Lahiri 212). As an adolescent in America she envies the American style of life (having boyfriends and dating), but she has to practice it elsewhere because her parents forbid her to lead that kind of life. She took refuge in Paris “Immersing herself in a third language, a third culture, had been her refuge – she approached French, unlike things American or Indian, without guilt, or misgivings, or expectations of any kind. It was easier to turn back on the two countries that could claim her in favour of one that had no claim what so ever” (Lahiri 214).

Moushumi’s multiplicity is not limited to her nationality or cultural identity, and in fact this characteristic of hers does not let her stick to anything in life permanently: “She feels moored... beyond the world that has defined and structured and limited her for so long” (Lahiri 253). When she marries Gogol she does not accept to change her last name to Ganguli and keeps her own name. She loves the way she is and the sense of herself, changing the name would suggest her acceptance of the sense of being somebody else, even if this person is Gogol: “she tells him that for most of her life he was exactly the sort of person

she had sought to avoid” (Lahiri 212). For Moushumi, marriage with Gogol is in fact another camp in the long line of camps in which she takes refuge. Her previous relationship devastated her and while she wanted to take refuge from that by going to Paris again, she took her mother’s advice to date and finally marry Gogol: this was a period of her life which ended by taking refuge in having an affair with another man: “The affair causes her to feel strangely at peace, the complication of it calming her, structuring her day” (Lahiri 266).

Gogol and Moushumi live for as year a husband and wife and as they move into the second year of their married life, they lose interest in each other. When she goes to Paris for a paper presentation, she meets her former friend and goes to bed with him. Lying with the small, balding, unemployed middle aged Dimitri, “She wonders if she is the only woman in her family ever to have betrayed her husband, to have been unfaithful. This is what upsets her most to admit: that the affair causes her to feel strangely at peace, the complication of it calming her, structuring her day” (266). When Gogol comes to know of it, he feels the chill of her secrecy numbing him, “like a poison spreading quickly through his veins.

He cannot blame her much, for they had both acted on the same impulse” (284). Without much argument they both agree to divorce. After the formal divorce, she moves to Paris.

Towards the end of the novel, pondering upon his life and relationships, Gogol is different. He feels guilty about his own ways of life through the years. Family is vital for him now. And looking into the past he is frightened to see that not only it has been his own routine to abandon the family but also it is a family tradition done by his parents as well: “He wonders how his parents had done it, leaving their respective families behind, seeing them to seldom, dwelling unconnected, in a perpetual state of expectation, of longing” (Lahiri 281). Contemplating “with stamina he fears he does not possess himself he had spent years maintaining distance from his origins... a distance that had not troubled him in the least, until it was too late” (281). He does not hate his name any more, instead now that he is losing the emotional network of family one by one he misses the name: “without people in the world to call him Gogol, no matter how long he himself lives, Gogol Ganguli will, once and for all, vanish

from the lips of loved ones, and so, cease to exist.

Yet the thought of this eventual demise provides no sense of victory, no solace. It provides no solace at all” (Lahiri 289). The last lines of the story illustrate Gogol’s preoccupation with his future. He has plans: “A month from now, he will begin a new job at a smaller architectural practice, producing his own designs” (289). As an architect working for other firms and designers up to now, he intends to be more original regarding his job. Like his decision regarding his job, he seems to be ready to be an architect of his own life, self and identity. The novel is about this perpetual dilemma faced by immigrants as they struggle to maintain their identities while trying to shake them off. At the same time it is about the series of distressing choices they are forced to make every day as they try hard to avoid being misfits in a foreign land. The immigrant’s journey, no matter how ultimately rewarding, is founded on departure and deprivation; but it secures for the subsequent generation a sense of arrival and advantage. An immigrant has an intense desire to be at once loyal to the old world and yet fluent in the new.

Lahiri gives a range of details and she uses these differences in cultures and cuisines to keep the reader aware of the growing rift between these two worlds, of how far Gogol has moved from his origins and of how strongly those Bengali ties hold him in ways that he only gradually begins to realize. Gogol finally learns that the answer is not to fully abandon or attempt to diminish either culture or world, but to mesh the two worlds together. Gogol is not fully in tune with his identity until he realizes that it is embellished by both cultures/worlds. He does not have to be one or the other; he does not have to choose. He is made up of both, and instead of weakening, his pride is strengthened by this. Though the novel wraps up with more downfalls occurring in Gogol's life, he is able to stand on his feet. He is no longer ashamed of himself or the way he has lived. He is proud of who he is and where he comes from. Most important, he is proud of his name and all that it means.

In chronicling more than three decades in the Ganguli's lives, Jhumpa Lahiri has not only given us a wonderfully intimate and knowing family portrait, she has also taken the haunting chamber of music of her first collection of stories and orchestrated its themes of exile, identity

balance between two worlds to create a symphonic work, a debut novel, '*The Namesake*', that is as assured and eloquent as the work of a longtime master of the craft. The language barrier that is to be the source of much struggle for Ashima and Ashoke is evident when they arrive at the hospital for Gogol's birth after she has been given a bed. Ashima looks for her husband, but he returns after a few minutes in Bengali, a language neither the nurses nor the doctor speaks. The curtain is a physical barrier, but it represents the symbolic barrier created by speaking Bengali in the United States. The works the American husbands at the hospital speak to their wives demonstrates the culture barrier between India and the United States. The language barrier arises as an issue as Gogol and Sonia grow older. Ashima and Ashoke send them to Bengali language and culture classes every other Saturday, but it never fails to unsettle them, that their children sound just like Americans.

However '*The Namesake*' is a novel that celebrates the cultural hybridity resulting from globalization and the interconnectedness of the modern world and rethinks conventional immigrant's experience. Lahiri is aware of the existing problem of cultural diversity in the

multicultural United States, and she argues that the struggle to grasp a transnational identity becomes an urgent issue for immigrants in this environment. While she represents Gogol as someone who is confused about his identity, she also presents Gogol as a prototypical transnational agent who lives between two different worlds with the possibility of creating multiplicity of identities. In fact Lahiri offers a revision of the contemporary United States not as a static and insular territory but a participant in transnational relations. Given the nature of mobility of people and their culture across nations, Lahiri territorializes the definite national and cultural identities of India suggesting that individuals cannot confine themselves within the narrow concept of national and cultural boundaries in this globalized world characterized by hybridity, Transculturalism and migration.

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